

Time to put the AODA into action

January 1, 2012 deadline for Ontario co-ops

By Joy Connelly

Ready to meet the January 1, 2012 deadline? That's the date all Ontario co-ops with one or more employees must comply with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act's* Customer Service Standards. See the sidebar, *AODA Customer Service Standards* for details on the requirements.

If you haven't got started yet, you might discover the process is more enjoyable than you think.



Take **OWN Co-op** in Toronto, for example. Their board approved its Accessible Customer Service Policy in September. The process was "quite refreshing," says **Esther Forde**, OWN Co-op's Housing Manager. She says that the board realized the co-op already met most of the requirements but had never written them into a policy.

That doesn't mean there weren't challenges. For example, OWN Co-op is still considering how to create the required feedback process for new applicants, and the best way to confirm contractors, many of whom have a long-standing relationship with the co-op, meet their training obligations.

OWN Co-op has found meeting its own training obligations more straightforward. Forde met the Customer Service Standard's training requirements through a free online course. "It's such a simple process—something you could do in a lunchtime," says Forde. The training will be rolled into the annual board orientation.

"DON'T GET SCARED OFF"

For **Shamrock Co-op** in Waterloo, accessibility was built right into the co-op's mandate. Of the co-op's 90 apartment and townhouse units, 19 are fully accessible, with 13 households receiving support services through the on-site Independent Living Centre. The office, common spaces, and playground are all fully accessible.

Their advice to co-ops who are just starting to think about accessibility?

"Don't get scared off. Don't think it's more than it is," says Board President **Sharron Garrah**. "The important thing is simply to recognize a person with a disability is a person first."

Garrah notes co-ops "don't need to stumble around. There are agencies that are very well versed in the AODA who are happy to help you. The main thing is to take time to understand. This is a positive thing that benefits many people."

"Communication is the big one," adds Board member **Larry Boshart**. "If people have trouble communicating, there needs to be extra time and understanding. But once things are understood, things can be done."

NEED HELP?

CHF Canada's online Resource Centre has everything you need to meet the Customer Service Standard. Check the Resource Centre's Diversity Section for

- a sample Accessible Customer Service Policy
- links to free online training
- checklists
- sample forms, including a form for contractors
- "Accessible Customer Service"—a 90-page guide adapted for co-ops

You can find the Resource Centre at www.chfcanada.coop/eng/pages2007/resourcecentre.asp.

Joy Connelly has worked in co-op and non-profit housing for 30 years. She has been the lead consultant to CHF Canada in the development of AODA resources for housing co-ops.

AODA Customer Service Standards



By January 1, 2012, all housing co-ops with one or more employees must

- **Train staff and members** who develop policy or deal with members or the public. Keep records. Plan how to train new staff, members, or volunteers.
- **Ensure co-op policies** meet the standards, including specific policies on
 - use of assistive devices
 - service animals
 - support persons
 - temporary service disruptions
 - feedback processes